

665 2.2.58
*The Regard due to Divine Revelation,
and to Pretences to it, considered.*

A
S E R M O N

PREACHED before the
Provincial Synod

OF

D U M F R E I S,

At their Meeting in *October* 1729.

On 1 THESS. V. 20, 21.

WITH A

P R E F A C E,

CONTAINING

Some Remarks on a BOOK lately
publish'd, Entitled, *Christianity as Old
as the Creation.*

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THE SECOND EDITION.

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2607

The Report of the ...
and its ...

SEERMON

Proving ...



At the Meeting of the ...
On the ...

RELATION

of the ...
and its ...

by ...

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THE PREFACE.



WITH respect to the following Sermon, I have nothing to say, but that being obliged to preach before a *Reverend Synod*, I thought it became me to choose such a Subject, as had a relation to the most important Concerns of Religion at this juncture.

THE Subject I have chosen is plainly of this nature : for the great Controversy at present is not about Rites and Ceremonies, or the Constitution and Model of a Church ; but the Debates of our Times are about the Foundation of Christianity ; and a question is made, whether the Christian Church ought to have a Being.

As this is a Controversy of the greatest moment, I was not willing to lose such an opportunity of stirring up my self and others to a due Consideration of its Importance, that each of us according to our Ability might contribute to the Interests of true Religion. And it's in the same view that I have allowed the Sermon to be printed.

BUT since the Sermon was preached, I have seen a Book lately publish'd, entitled, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, which has a manifest relation to the same Subject; and therefore it may not be improper to make a few Remarks upon it, to go along with the Sermon.

IN the first place, this Author speaks a great deal about the *Perfection* of the *Law of Nature*; and “ that it's
 “ founded on the Nature of Things,
 “ and their immutable Relations, and
 “ therefore can no more be altered or
 “ vary, than these eternal Relations of
 “ Things; that nothing can be added
 “ to it, nothing taken from it; and
 “ that

“ that it's not only full and complete,
 “ but very plain and evident, since the
 “ Circumstances in which every Man
 “ is placed, if duely considered, point
 “ out clearly what is his Duty in these
 “ Circumstances ; yea, so evident is the
 “ Law of Nature, according to our
 “ Author, that Men must shut their
 “ Eyes if they do not preceive it.” And
 from all this he infers, “ That there is
 “ no room nor necessity for any posi-
 “ tive Institution whatsoever.”

BUT our Author has not expressed
 himself on this subject so clearly as
 might have been wished : and to make
 the whole plainer, we may observe,

I. THAT according to the various
 Circumstances in which rational Beings
 may be placed, there are various Rules
 proper for them to observe, all which
 Rules are indeed founded on the na-
 tures of things and their various Rela-
 tions ; nor can there be any Rule pro-
 per to be observed by a rational Crea-
 ture, but what results from the Rela-
 tions of things, or the Circumstances in
 which

which he is placed : And in this general Sense, if all the Rules to be observed in all the various Circumstances of rational Creatures be called the *Law of Nature*, to be sure, this Law is absolutely perfect ; there can be no addition to it, no diminution from it ; nor is there any room for any positive Rule or Institution, nor indeed for any other Institution whatsoever.

2. ACCORDING to the various Degrees of Knowledge of the Natures of Things and their different Relations, with which rational Creatures are endowed, the Rules which are founded on these Relations, are either clearer or more obscure : and as there are various degrees of Knowledge among rational Creatures ; the Rules which concern them, how fixed or certain soever in themselves, are not equally clear unto all.

3. As there are Relations of things, which are not perceived by many rational Beings ; so it's very possible there may be Rules resulting from these Relations proper to be observed by rational
Creatures

Creatures in certain Circumstances, which cannot be found out by these rational Creatures, and which perhaps no finite Understanding can discover.

Now here may be a Foundation for *positive Rules*, or *Institutions* : for *positive Institutions* are not such as have no Foundation in Nature, and do not result from the Relations of things ; nor are they such as flow from meer arbitrary Will without any reason ; but they are such Rules or Institutions, as flow from certain Relations which cannot be found out by such rational Creatures as they concern, or perhaps by any finite Understanding whatsoever.

To give an Instance of such a *positive Institution*, I observe our Author acknowledges (10th Chapter, near the beginning) that it is the Voice of Nature that God should be publickly worshipped. Now if this is the Voice of Nature, may there not be a Foundation in Nature for a particular Day, on which Men are to convene for this purpose ; such as every fifth, seventh, tenth, or twentieth

twentieth Day ? It is certainly very possible, that some one of these Days may be more proper than any of the rest : yea, it's scarce to be imagined but a Being of infinite Knowledge and Wisdom who has before him the whole State of Humane Nature, and the complete sum of Humane Affairs from beginning to end, must see it more convenient for Men in their ordinary Practice to assemble for publick Worship, rather every seventh, or every tenth day than any other. Now here there is room for what we call a *positive Rule, or Institution*: here a Rule may arise from the Relations of things, which I presume no Man will say he can determine ; since he has not such an extensive view of the Condition of the World, as can enable him to see thro' those infinite Relations of things, on which it is founded. And therefore it is a very proper Affair to be revealed by God : and God may reveal this unto us, either by discovering in some supernatural manner the Relations of things, on which this Rule is founded ; or barely

affirming

affirming the Rule itself, and furnishing us with sufficient Evidence that it's he himself who affirms it.

4. THERE is no general Argument which can prove, that every rational Being must be able to discover every Rule which is proper to be observed by him in every Circumstance, in which he can possibly be placed; and far less, which can prove he can know this, purely by the Light of Nature: but by the same way of arguing, it may be proved, that rational Creatures can fall into no distress whatsoever.

THE only general Argument to prove this, must be drawn from the Moral Perfections of God; such as his Equity, his Goodness, and his tender Concern about his Creatures; which must prompt him to order Things in such a manner, as that nothing shall be proper for rational Creatures, but what they can thus discover.

BUT if it be possible for rational Creatures in any instance to be negligent or vicious, and thus to bring themselves
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into such a Condition, as may render the Measures they are to follow very dark and obscure, or in some Cases absolutely uncertain; why may not God leave them to continue in such Circumstances, at least for a time, as a warning to other rational Creatures to beware of the like escapes? Or if the Goodness of God cannot allow this, may we not argue in the same manner, that the Goodness of God cannot allow rational Creatures to fall into any distress whatsoever?

AND this, by the way, takes off the force of our Author's Reasonings from the Goodness of God; by which he endeavours to shew, that since Christianity has not obtained universally, it cannot contain any thing needful to be known by all Men, but what their Reason can discover without it: and therefore it is only a *Republication of the Law of Nature*. For notwithstanding the Goodness of God, he may leave some rational Creatures to feel the effects of their Crimes, and suffer them to
continue

continue in Circumstances in which the Measures they are to follow may be absolutely incertain; and in doing this, he may serve the most excellent purposes, and consult the *general Good of his Creatures*. And therefore tho' a Revelation be necessary, and be afforded to some that are guilty, there is no necessity he should do it to all. But to return:

WHAT I have observed on this Head will serve to clear what our Author advances against the Laws of God being *Arbitrary*, and shew the weakness of the Consequences he draws from this Topick. I am as much persuaded as our Author, that God gives no *Arbitrary* Rules, and is not the Author of any *Arbitrary* Laws; and that all the Laws of God are founded upon, and flow from the Natures of Things, and the Relations they bear to one another; and that God cannot be the Author of Laws that no ways tend to the good of rational Beings, or have no *native Goodness* or *Excellency*, but flow from *meer Will* and

and Pleasure, not guided and governed by *Wisdom and Goodness*. If the Institutions he calls *positive* be of this kind, I do not see but every Man who has suitable Notions of God's Moral Perfections must give them up: such Rules have not the stamp of infinite Wisdom and Goodness, but are manifest signs of Peevishness and Folly, yea, Malice and Cruelty. But I have already shewn that this is not the true Notion of *positive Rules and Institutions*; but that they are such Rules, as tho' they are founded on the Natures of things, and their Relations to one another, and consequently have a *native Goodness and Propriety*; yet cannot be found out by such rational Creatures as are concerned in them, because they depend on a variety of Relations they cannot see through, and therefore must be discovered in a supernatural manner. I have likewise shewn, that there is room for such Rules, and that such Rules, are very proper to be revealed by God; and therefore all our Author's general Reasonings

sonings against *arbitrary Laws* and *positive Institutions* must fall to the ground.

NOR ought any Man to alledge, that all those Rules must be *Arbitrary*, for which we cannot see sufficient reason: for tho' our Reason is absolutely necessary in matters of Religion, and without it our Devotion must degenerate into Superstition and Enthusiasm; yet we exalt it too far, if we affirm, that it's able immediately, and without any assistance from Revelation, to discover all those Relations of Things, and all the Rules arising from them, that can concern us in any State whatsoever. We have not such large and extensive Views of the Natures of Things, and their various Relations, that we ought to talk at this rate. Are there not many excellent Laws made by *Governors here on Earth*, of which many of the Subjects are not capable to see the Grounds and Reasons; and is it not probable that this must sometimes happen in the *Government of the Universe*? But,

If

If any one shall alledge, " That
 " it is impossible for us to have suffi-
 " cient Evidence, that a Rule comes
 " from God, unless we be able to dis-
 " cover its native Goodness, and Ex-
 " cellency, and that there is vast Dan-
 " ger of Impositions by designing Men,
 " if we allow any Rule to be divine
 " but what is of this kind ?

To this I reply, That without doubt
 many have been imposed on in this
 manner ; and this is one considerable
 Source of the Superstition of the World,
 as our Author affirms. But tho' this
 Principle, *that a Rule may come from*
God, the native Excellency of which
we cannot discern, has been sadly a-
 bused by all Parties in Religion ; yet
 we ought not, as our Author insinuates,
 to give up the Principle itself : since
 this would be attended with greater
 Danger, and effectually prevent any
 Advantages we may possibly obtain by
 attending to those Notices of things
 which the Deity in his infinite Wisdom
 may see proper to afford us. But the
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only proper effect of such abuses is to make us careful to avoid these Impositions, and not to trust without sufficient Evidence.

BUT if it be asked, If we can give any Specimen of such Evidence? I think this is very possible: for let us suppose a Man to come down from the Clouds in the sight of Multitudes; or, if you please, that he is born in the ordinary way, that he converses a considerable time in the World, that he discovers a Knowledge more than Humane, that he appears to have the perfect command of Nature, and so be able to do what he pleases, however extraordinary or miraculous, of which he gives many undoubted Instances; and that in his Behaviour he discovers great Goodness, Compassion, and Good-Will to Mankind, and acts up to the Rules of Piety and Virtue: Now if such a Man or Being shall affirm, that God has revealed unto him several things relating to our present and future Condition, and has commanded him to discover them

them unto us for our Good, tho' we have never experienced such Revelations ourselves, and consequently cannot have a just Notion of the Method by which they are made; yet, if the Discoveries this superiour Nature makes are not contradictory and absurd; far more if they are abundantly probable when they are revealed; I cannot imagine why we ought not to take his Testimony, and act upon the Supposition that what he advances is true; even tho' we should suppose that it's *possible* for us to be deceived, and that a Being may discover a superiour Power and Knowledge, and appear to be Virtuous and Good, and yet in some Cases be an Impostor. For a *meer Possibility* neither does nor can affect us: it's *possible* the House where I am now writing may fall and crush me, therefore I ought to get out of it as fast as I can; but it is *possible* too, there may be Persons lying in wait to kill me as soon as I go out, and therefore I ought to stay where I am. In short, there is no end of *Possibilities*, nor can they serve for

a Rule to us ; but when we cannot have Demonstration, which will be the Case for the most part, we ought to go upon such grounds as Mankind commonly reckon sufficient for their most important Affairs : and in the present Case we ought to satisfy our selves with an Evidence of this kind, and venture our greatest Concerns upon such a Bottom. For here we have a superior Nature, who has Methods of knowing and acting intirely above our Capacity ; and at the same time gives us the strongest Evidences of his Probity and Virtue in general, and his Benevolence to us in particular : he asserts things no ways impossible ; yea, no more improbable than those extraordinary and miraculous things he himself hath wrought ; (the Argument is still stronger, if they be abundantly probable in themselves) why ought we not to believe him ? I cannot see, that we can refuse to do it, but upon such Principles as will discard *all Evidence* but downright Demonstration.

AND that we may have a distinct View of this Argument, let us consider that the stress of the Evidence does not depend only upon the extraordinary Knowledge and miraculous Powers with which this superiour Nature is endowed; but we must also take into the Estimate the Probity and Goodness of his moral Character: for since it's Testimony, or the Assertion of this superiour Nature on which we rely, there are three things necessary to make a Testimony Valid. One, that the Being on whose Testimony we depend, sufficiently understand the matter concerning which he testifies; or rather, that we can see no reason to make us suspect he does not: and it's an Advantage in this Case, if there are Circumstances from whence we may conclude that he really does. A second, that his moral Character be so good, as we have no ground to think he will impose upon us. And to these two a third may perhaps be added, that we see no Motive or Interest he has to deceive

ceive us. Nor can any of these Circumstances well be wanting: for as we cannot depend upon one, who, as we have reason to believe, knows little or nothing of the Subject which he testifies; nor upon one whose moral Character is not good: so there is less regard due to a Testimony, if it comes from one who has visible Interest to deceive. But if we have no ground to conclude the Being is ignorant of what he testifies, if his moral Character be good, and we can see no Interest he has to deceive; his Testimony is valid, and ought to be received.

Now if we consider the Case I have supposed, we shall find all the Circumstances concurring, that are needful to make a Testimony valid: since, by the supposition, the moral Character of this superiour Being is entirely Good; and his supernatural Knowledge and Power, make it not only possible, but exceeding probable, that he can neither have any Interest to deceive us, nor is ignorant of what he testifies. And herein

I think will appear the Force of Miracles to confirm a Testimony. For Miracles do not of themselves show the Testimony of the Worker of them to be Good ; nor is there any necessary Connexion betwixt the working of a Miracle, and the Truth of every Proposition which is asserted by the Worker ; since Miracles, or what to us may appear such, may be wrought by wicked and malicious Beings, who are so vitious and immoral in their Characters, that the Miracles they work cannot make their Testimony valid. But if the Worker of the Miracles may be depended on, on account of his moral Character ; that he is also endowed with supernatural Knowledge and Power, is a very strong Circumstance to strengthen his Testimony, and especially in things that are extraordinary. For if one who has nothing extraordinary in his Character shall assert something very extraordinary, as that God hath revealed unto him several important Truths, and given him a Commission to testify them unto

unto others ; tho' the Person has appeared all his Life to be a Man of Honesty and Integrity, yet his Testimony will make but a small Impression on us : But if he is endowed with miraculous Knowledge and Powers, this adds considerable weight to what he affirms, and removes all Objections drawn from the extraordinary Nature of what he asserts : This shows that he is assisted by a supernatural Power ; and in this Case I cannot see any Reason that can justify us in rejecting his Testimony.

If it shall be alledged, That tho' such a Testimony is all we could fairly desire in any such Case, in which Testimony is needful ; yet since it is owned that Testimony is not a Demonstration, and since we may be very easy and happy tho' we observe no other Rules with regard to Religion, but such as Reason clearly teaches us ; it's best for us not to take it on any Testimony whatsoever, that a Rule, of which we cannot see the Use and Excellency, comes from God ;

God ; especially since this Principle has been the Occasion of so much Superstition and Enthusiasm :

To this I think it sufficient to reply, 1st, That in the following Sermon I have shown, that we cannot be easy or happy, but under an endless Anxiety about our guilty State, without a Declaration of the Divine Will; and therefore we are not in such Circumstances as are supposed in this Objection; but it is necessary for us to have a Declaration of the Will of God in this matter, nor can we be easy and happy by adhering meerly to the Light of Nature. And 2^{dly}, Supposing it were not so, and that Revelation was not absolutely necessary, but only profitable and convenient; yet even upon this Supposition we ought to depend on such Evidence as I have described. For as it is the ordinary Method for Men to embrace a Testimony of this kind, in things that are only convenient, and not absolutely necessary; and he would not be reckoned a wise Man who would do otherwise :

therwise: So it is certainly just and reasonable to do so in the Affairs of Religion; nor can we without being Criminal reject an Evidence that is *sufficient*, merely because it is not *Demonstration*.

THUS I have endeavoured to give a Specimen of such Evidence as is sufficient to establish the Authority of Rules whose native Excellency our Reason cannot discover. The Case about which I have reasoned, is only a Supposition, nor can I apply it to any Matter of Fact in such cursory Remarks; but I am persuaded it falls vastly short of that Evidence, which may be brought for Christianity. But to proceed:

THERE is an Objection against the Christian Revelation drawn from the small Efficacy it has had to make Men truly good, and the many Mischiefs it has occasion'd in the World. Our Author (chap. 14. p. 404.) insinuates, that the World is not much mended since the days of *Tiberius*; and that Christians are not arrived to any higher State
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of Perfection than the rest of Mankind. And (chap. 8. p. 97, 98.) that the Bigotry which has had such dismal Effects among Christians, was little known or felt in the Pagan World. And it is allowed by some, that Christianity, instead of making Men more social and kind, and advancing the Interest of Virtue and Morality, has rendered them more unsociable and fierce than they were before, and been the occasion of more Strife and Contention, more terrible Wars and Bloodshed, and in short, of more Villany and Wickedness than any other Institution whatsoever. And from all this it is urged, That if Christianity was really of God, and designed by him to be an Instrument of perfecting the rational Nature, it must have had greater Success, and been the occasion of greater Advantages to Mankind: Nor could the Purposes of Heaven have been so far defeated, that what was designed to be the chief Mean of reforming the World, instead of answering this End, should on the contra-

ry prove the Instrument of such barbarous Cruelties and destructive Calamities, that there is good ground to believe it has done vastly more hurt than good. In answer to which, I shall not deny that Christianity has been made the occasion of much Mischief: Christians must allow, that it has been, and still continues to be abused to the vilest purposes. For my own part, I am so much persuaded of this, that tho' I am ready to believe Accounts are considerably aggravated, yet I shall not at present debate any particular Facts with such as insist on this Objection; but make it appear in general, that turn the Argument as they please, they can never make any thing of it to subvert the Christian Cause. And for this we may observe, that if they do any thing to purpose, they must shew that Christianity has done more hurt than good; for if upon the whole it has done more service than prejudice, there cannot be any foundation for their Objection: But that Christianity has been made even

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the Occasion of more hurt than good, is a point that can never be made out. For it is impossible to make any thing of this nature appear but by such a Comparison of antient with modern Times, and Christian with Pagan and Mahometan Countrys, and of particular Christians with those of another Religion, and of the inward Sentiments and Tempers of Christians, Pagans, and Mahometans, as well as the outward Conversation, that no Man is able to go thro' with it: and therefore whatever Flourishes and popular Harangues it may furnish, there can never be an Argument from this Topic, that can have any weight against Christianity: Especially if it be further considered, that to any who look impartially into the original Records of Christianity, it must appear evident, that the making it the *Occasion of any Mischief at all*, is a manifest Abuse and Perversion of it; not only quite foreign, but grossly and obviously contrary, to its original Design and genuine Tendency: and is, therefore,

therefore, only an Instance that the best things may be abused, and perverted to the very worst purposes. And this sure can afford no good Argument against Christianity ; unless this can be supported as a just Principle ; *That no good thing ought to be done, which is capable of having a bad Use made of it afterwards,* or which the Art and Wickedness of designing Men can possibly pervert to a bad purpose : which would be in effect to say, that *no good thing at all should ever be done.*

I shall conclude these Remarks with considering another Objection drawn from the want of Perspicuity in our sacred Books : for, according to our Author, the holy Writings are so perplexed and obscure, that we are so far from being assisted by them in discovering the Will of God, or enabled to determine what otherwise we could not know ; that, on the other hand, they are rather detrimental ; and if not interpreted, or rather corrected, by our natural

Notions of God and Religion, are very ready to lead us into Mistakes.

BUT it is easy to take off the Force of this Objection. No doubt there are many obscure Passages in the sacred Books : nor is this to be wondered at, considering their Antiquity ; the Languages in which they are written, so different from ours ; the Allusions to antient Facts and Customs ; the different Manners and Ways of Thinking, Speaking and Writing of antient and modern Times, and eastern and western Countries : on all these accounts, and others which might be named, it's very natural that there should be many obscure places in the holy Writings, nor could it be otherwise without a Miracle. But that they are so obscure as our Author represents them, or that they can assist us in determining nothing of moment, but what we may know without them, I utterly deny ; and on the contrary assert, that they teach us several Doctrines of the greatest Importance, which we cannot know otherwise,

wise, and that very plainly and clearly.
 I shall instance in the Doctrine of a Sin-
 ner's being accepted of God on his sin-
 cere Repentance, which I have shewn
 in the following Sermon not to be de-
 terminable by Reason, tho' it's very
 clearly taught in Scripture. I may in-
 stance also in the Doctrine of the Re-
 surrection of the Body, and the Solem-
 nity of the future Judgment, that are
 clearly contained in Scripture, but im-
 possible to be determined without it.
 But I need not mention particular Doc-
 trines ; in short, the whole Method of
 God's dealing with Creatures that are
 guilty, must be a matter of pure Reve-
 lation, since we have not sufficient *Data*
 for explaining it, without a positive
 Declaration of the Will of God ; and
 nothing that our Author has advanced
 can shew the contrary : and indeed it
 would be odd if it should ; since it's as
 impossible to determine what Methods
 God will take with the Guilty without
 a Revelation of his Will, as it would be
 to determine what depends on meer
 Will

Will, and Pleasure : for altho God always acts according to the best Reasons, yet there is such an infinity of Reasons that must come into consideration in a matter of this kind, that it's all one with respect to any Determination we can make about it, as if God acted without any Reason, and by meer Will and Pleasure. Now, if this be the case, as it certainly is, if our Author could prove what he alledges about the Obscurity of Scripture, the plain Consequence would be, that we have no Certainty that God will accept a Sinner upon his Repentance. But the Obscurity of Scripture is not so great as our Author represents ; for as there are several Passages that are obscure, so there are others that are exceeding plain, especially such as relate to the Methods in which God will deal with the Guilty; and for the ascertaining of these Methods, as I have observed in the Sermon, a divine Revelation was chiefly afforded.





I THESS. V. 20, 21.

Despise not Prophecysings — prove all things — hold fast that which is good.

My Reverend Fathers and Brethren,



U FFER me to lay before you a few things, which in their own nature are of no small importance ; and, considering the temper of the Age, are very proper

for our most serious Thought. I wish to propose them, with that humility and modesty which is suitable to my personal Character ; and at the same time, with that freedom and boldness which becomes a Minister of the Gospel, when discoursing from the place where I have the honour to stand.

In the conclusion of the Epistle from which I have read those two Verses, we have several very short, but comprehensive Rules for our Practice ; and in particular the three following, which I am to discourse on at this time :
Despise not prophecysings — prove all things hold

— *hold fast that which is good.* I have joined them together, as being related, and tending to illustrate each other. By the *Prophecys*, which we are here exhorted not to despise, some may understand the antient Revelations, or those Scriptures which were own'd by the *Jews* to be divine; others the explication of these antient Scriptures, or the Interpretations by the Prophets in the days of the Apostle *Paul*; and others perhaps the newer Revelations of that Age: but I do not see why we may not join all these Senses together, and understand the Apostle as exhorting the *Thessalonians* in this manner: *Do not, by neglecting the consideration of the Characters of Divinity that the Holy Scriptures bear, despise that antient Canon of Scripture already established; nor reject without Examination the Interpretations of this Canon deliver'd by your Teachers, nor the newer Revelations of your own times; but give every thing that has any reasonable pretence to divine Revelation a fair hearing, examine and try all pretences with Equity and Candour, use your Reason freely and impartially, embrace whatever appears sound and genuine, and be not afraid to reject whatever is spurious and false.* This last particular of rejecting what is false and spurious, tho' not plainly expressed, is yet necessarily imply'd in the Direction, *hold fast that which is good*; which must be understood in this manner,

hold

hold fast all that is good, and no more; or hold fast only that which is good.

THUS I have laid before you, what I take to be the Sense of the Text; and if we may be allowed to conjecture at the occasion of these directions, it's probable the Apostle was led into them by observing false Teachers springing up in the Church, and particularly some who pretended unjustly to divine Inspiration. There is mention of such in several places of the New Testament, and such we may imagine were the unhappy Consequences of their groundless pretences, that a humour was arising among some, of calling the true and genuine Revelations of God into question; while others rashly, and without Caution, believed every bold Pretender: some perhaps were for rejecting all pretences to divine Revelation, because of some noted Impostures; and others made no distinction, but embraced all without scruple, believing every Spirit, whether true or false. Now in opposition to both these sorts of Persons, which either were in the Church in that Age, or might easily be supposed to arise in After-Ages; we may imagine the Apostle lays down these Rules in the Text, *Not to despise all pretences to divine Revelation without tryal, but to examine the different pretences, embracing such as they found good, and rejecting the spurious and false.*

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THUS the Apostle directs the *Thessalonians*, and the same advices are exceeding proper for us in this Age : for not only are these Rules general and equally binding on all, being of eternal Obligation ; but they are in a particular manner proper for our Reflection, it being but too evident how much they are transgressed by different Parties of Mankind amongst us.

NOW in discoursing on this Subject, I shall, in the

First place, consider it in general, and endeavour to illustrate these Rules, as they are suited to all Times and Ages whatsoever.

Secondly, I shall consider some particular Methods of Transgressing these Rules, which are but too common in the present Age ; and take notice of the unreasonableness of such Conduct. And,

Thirdly, I shall take notice of some things that seem proper to be observed by the Ministers of the Gospel, and all such as wish well to the Cause of divine Revelation.

First, I shall consider this Subject in general ; and endeavour to illustrate these Rules as they are suited to all Times and Ages whatsoever.

AND

AND as to the first Rule, *that we are not to reject all pretences to divine Revelation, and to despise Prophecys in the bulk, and without tryal*: This is surely a good Rule, nor can any Man have just Reason to deny it. The Reason on which any Man can, with the least shew of Justice, declare for rejecting all pretences to divine Revelation without tryal, must either be,

First, That it is impossible there can be any divine Revelation at all. Or,

Secondly, That there are so many Impostures, and of such a kind, that it is impossible to discern betwixt the true and the false. Or,

Thirdly, That there is no occasion for our troubling ourselves about the matter, since our Reason alone can instruct us sufficiently in all that is necessary to be known about Religion and a future State.

I do not see that a wise Man can justify himself, in being altogether unconcerned about divine Revelation, unless he be persuaded that some one of these Cases is the Truth: he must either think, that it is impossible for God to declare any Truths to Mankind in a way of Revelation, or he must imagine that there has been so much Craft and Trick in this Matter, and so many Impostures in the Case, that it is not possi-

ble to discern the true pretences from the false; or else must conclude, that tho' there may possibly be some Truth at the bottom, in what is alledged concerning divine Revelation, yet it is needless for him to enquire into the matter, since antecedent to any divine Revelation, and without any assistance from it, his own Reason can sufficiently instruct him, with respect to Religion and a future State. Some one of these Reasons must needs be alledged by one who would act reasonably; and yet I cannot see how a reasonable Man can admit of any of them.

FOR, in the first place, can any Man have good reason, to believe it impossible for God to declare any Truths to Mankind by way of Revelation? God hath indeed endowed Men with Reason, by which they are capable of acquiring a good share of Knowledge, and where Knowledge fails, of making probable conjectures; but yet there is no ground to assert, that this is the only method, by which God can lead Men to the knowledge of the Truth. On the contrary, as Men gain a great deal of valuable Knowledge, by the Testimony of credible Witnesses; so there is nothing to prove it impossible, that God should employ Beings of a higher order, to assure us of many things, which we cannot determine by Reasoning and Conjecture: Nor can it be shewn to be impossible for God, without the Ministry of any other Being whatever, to enlighten

enlighten the Minds of Men, and inspire them with the Knowledge of Truths that are not to be discovered by Reason or Experience; and that in so clear a manner, as to make them as certain of them, as of self-evident Propositions. I only barely assert these things, it being needless to illustrate what is so plain and obvious; and besides, I scarce think any will lay the stress of their argument here, and assert, that it is impossible for God, to make known any Truths to Mankind, by any other means than the common Methods of Reasoning.

NOR can I think, that any will chuse to put the issue of this cause upon the second of these Reasons, and assert, that there has been so much Craft and Trick in this Matter, and so many Impostures in the case of divine Revelation, that it's impossible to discern the true from the pretended; for whatever difficulty there may be in the case from pious or impious Frauds, yet to assert that it's altogether impossible, to discern between true and false pretences to divine Revelation, is the same thing as to assert, that God cannot reveal any Truths to Mankind at all; for if there are no methods by which Men can know when God makes a Revelation; if there are no methods to distinguish it from all Impostures; it's evident, God can make no Revelation on which we can depend, and therefore can make none; since a Revelation we cannot depend on, is to all purposes the same with none at all. I cannot think then
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that any will put the issue of the cause upon this second Reason ; but whoever pretends to act reasonably, must lay their whole stress upon the

THIRD, namely, That whether what is alledged concerning divine Revelation be true or false, as it's hard for him to be positive, so it's needless for him to enquire ; since, antecedent to any divine Revelation, and without any assistance from it, his own Reason can sufficiently instruct him, with respect to Religion and a future State. This, together with the imagined difficulty in obtaining a satisfactory Evidence about Revelation, arising from that Cloud which the great number of Impostures have cast upon it, is, in my apprehension, the chief Reason which can be alledged, for our making no enquiry into Revelation, our contempt of all pretences to it without scruple, or, in the Apostle's Words, why we *despise Prophecysings*.

IN answer to this Reasoning, I shall only observe, that whatever Difficulty there may be in discerning true Revelations from false ; yet since it is not impossible, as I have but just now observed, this Difficulty of it self can be no sufficient Reason for despising Prophecysings ; except it be alledged further, that it's needless to make any inquiry concerning them, because our Reason itself is sufficient to answer all the Ends which they do. The removal of this Pretence therefore, is what I shall now chiefly apply

apply my self to, and endeavour to shew that Reason is not such a sufficient Faculty, that it can yield a full Instruction in matters of Religion, and concerning a future State.

I am sensible many things might be insisted on to this purpose; but considering that I am not allowed to take up much of your time, I shall confine my self to one single Point, and venture the whole Cause upon it.

I shall freely grant that Reason teaches us many things with respect to God and Religion; how far it goes, is not my present business to enquire: but supposing that it is able to instruct us in all other things, still it leaves us at a loss in this one, which is of the greatest moment, and in which we stand in need of the greatest certainty: namely, how God will deal with Sinners, or such as in many cases have acted a vitious and unreasonable part. That this is the case of all of us, cannot be denied; for we cannot deny, that in many things we have done what we are convinced has been wrong, and ought not to have been done. This Deists themselves, as well as others, must own. Indeed, had Men never been guilty, Reason might assure them, they should never be punished for Crimes of which they were intirely innocent; but what must be done in the case of Guilt, is a Question, at the same time of the highest importance, and yet not to be determined by Reason. It's true, we may without Relevation be sure, that God
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is infinitely Wise and Good, as well as Just, and that as he will do nothing inconsistent with Justice, so neither with Wisdom and Goodness ; that is, we may be sure that God will deal with the rational World, according to the highest Goodness that is consistent with Wisdom. But the question is not, whether God is infinitely wise and good ; nor whether a Being infinitely wise and good will, as Governour or Judge, observe Rules which are so : but what those Rules are, which such a Being will observe with regard to Criminals ; not whether they will be wise and good, but what Wisdom and Goodness in this Case, are. And here Reason is at a stand : for be it so that God is infinitely Good, yet we know that the best-natured Being in the World may, in the capacity of a Governour or Judge, find it necessary on many occasions to punish Transgressors ; and if he is infinite in Wisdom as well as Goodness, will surely see it reasonable and just to make a difference between the Good and the Bad. And therefore, whatever Conjectures we may form, about the Methods by which God governs rational Creatures that have transgressed ; we can never by our Reasoning attain to any Certainty in the Case. A Deist may indeed fancy to himself, that a Being of so much goodness will not be rigorous, and censure every trifling Fault ; that when he does punish, he will not do it in any high degree, or for any length of time, and far less for ever ;

ever ; and that he will pardon on Repentance and Reformation. But it's evident, to speak the most favourably of this Scheme, it is nothing but Conjecture, and we may form Conjectures on the other side : in short, the Man who thinks he can determine by his reasoning how God will deal with the Guilty, and fancies it needless there should be any Revelation about it, acts much like a Rebel, who is for finding out by Reason how his Prince is to deal with him ; and who thinking it a matter of no concern, whether his Prince has proclaimed an Act of Indemnity or not, makes no enquiry into the Fact. But I think a cautious and wise Man would look on it as the surest, or rather the only sure Method, to see if there was an Indemnity, and what the Prince had openly declared ; nor would he think it safe to trust to Reasonings and Conjectures in a matter of this moment.

I think the Application is very obvious, and therefore it's certainly a good Rule not to reject all Pretences to divine Revelation in the gross, and despise Prophecysings without trial ; but on the contrary, to give every thing that has any reasonable pretence to Divine Revelation a fair Hearing, and to examine it with Equity and Candour. And this leads to the

SECOND Rule which the Apostle lays down, *Prove all Things.*

As we are not to despise Prophecysings, by rejecting all Pretences to divine Revelation

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without

without Examination, so we ought not to embrace any thing as a divine Revelation rashly, but *to prove all things*. The Design of which Words is not that every Man should examine every thing, whether he be capable to examine it or not; but, as the Context plainly directs, by restraining this Precept to a particular Subject, namely the Prophecys we are not to despise; we may suppose the Sense to be, that in Matters of Religion we are not to act rashly and blindly, not to believe every Spirit, and give credit to every Pretender; but we ought to try the Spirits, and prove their different Pretences; this being the only Method which can preserve us from Imposition. And that I may illustrate this Subject a little, I shall observe these three Things.

First, It's evident, according to this Rule, that Reason is useful with respect to Religion, or that in Matters of Religion, as well as others, we are to make use of our rational Faculties. This in general is owned by all, and with good reason; for a rational Creature cannot act in any Case as a rational Creature, without using its rational Faculties, and must therefore use them in matters of Religion as well as in every thing else; except one will please to alledge, that in matters of Religion we are not to act as rational Creatures. With respect then to divine Revelation; Before we embrace any thing as such, we must not only make use of our Reason to find out its true
Meaning,

Meaning, but we must examine impartially whether it be accompany'd with sufficient Evidence, nor are we to believe it without good Grounds. Before we admit it, we cannot be too scrupulous, nor examine it with too much Care, since it is of great Importance to us not to be deceived about divine Revelation: It's here we are to exert our Reason to the utmost; here lies the Province of Reason; and, if I may be allowed to say so, it's only Province: For after we have found any Proposition to be revealed by God, we have nothing to do but firmly believe it. And in examining into the Evidence that is alledged for a divine Revelation, two Things are to be considered. First, the Nature of the Proposition said to be revealed, and whether it is capable of being proved: Next, the Evidence that is offered to prove it. Now, as to the Nature of the Proposition itself: in general, every Proposition that is not contradictory or absurd, is capable of being proved; and therefore if it is accompany'd with sufficient Evidence, may be a Part of divine Revelation. Indeed, if a Proposition be contradictory or absurd, we need never enquire if God has revealed it; for there can never be so strong a Proof on the one hand, that God hath revealed a Contradiction, as there is plain Evidence on the other that he has not. But if the Proposition is not a Contradiction, it is capable of being prov'd: For if we consider even humane Testimony, we may adventure to

assert, that the Testimony of Men may be attended with such a Variety of convincing Circumstances, as may make it not only just and rational to receive it, but even impossible for us to withhold our Assent in any Matter of Fact that is not absurd or impossible. And if this be the Case with respect to mere humane Testimony; to be sure it is possible for God to afford us stronger Evidence than any humane Testimony whatsoever. And therefore if we have sufficient Evidence otherwise, we ought not to reject a Proposition from being an Article of divine Revelation, merely because it is extraordinary, and out of the common road, and would never have been once thought of, if it had not been revealed; or because it is attended with some Circumstances we would not easily believe, if we had not abundant Evidence to convince us of their Truth. But,

Secondly, with respect to this Rule, *Prove all things*, we may observe, that it is directed not only to the Clergy (as they are call'd) but to the Laity; not only to the Learned, but the Unlearned, and to all, without exception. And this is most just; for it is incumbent upon every rational Creature, as such: Since the only thing that can justify any one in not trying and examining what is of moment to him, is his being incapable to do it; or, in other Words, his not being a rational Creature. For whilst he is ranked among rational Beings, it will eternally lie upon him to make use of his Reason to find out the Truth in Matters that concern

concern him. Nor can he absolutely depend on any Man or any Body of Men, or any Being whatsoever, that is not infallible: But whatever Regard and Deference he may have to them, he ought not to trust them intirely, and believe them without reserve, but should see with his own Eyes as far as he is able. Nor can I think of any considerable Objection against this Rule, except this shall be thought one, That if there are any particular Persons or Bodies of Men, tho' not absolutely infallible, yet far more likely to find out the Truth than we are, considering both their Knowledge and Honesty; it's safer for us to depend upon them than ourselves, and to embrace their Opinions rather than such as in other respects seem more probable to us. To which I answer, in the first place, That it appears much easier in the present Condition of the World, amidst the great multitude of Differences amongst Mankind, to find out the Truth in the most important Points directly and immediately ourselves, than to determine who these Men, or Bodies of Men are, on whom, tho' not infallible, we are yet to have such entire Dependance. And, secondly, besides this, it does not seem possible to determine who these Men, or Bodies of Men are, on whom we may so firmly depend, unless we examine the most considerable of their Opinions. Now, considering both these Circumstances of the Case, I think it will be evident, that with what appearance of Reason and
Probability

Probability soever it may be urged against any particular Person, "that it's probable such a
 " learned and good Man will be rather in the
 " right than he, or that at least this cannot but
 " be supposed of the Church, consisting of
 " such a number of learned and good Men;"

I say, how contrary soever it may appear to Modesty, for a particular Person to pretend that he is himself in the right, and such a learned and good Man, or such a venerable Body of Men in the wrong : Yet there is no Body of Men, how venerable soever, in whom we may put such absolute confidence; but that on certain occasions we may presume to differ from them, how learned, and wise, and good soever, if they are not infallible : and still we ought always to examine as far and as well as we are able.

BUT, *Thirdly*, With respect to this Rule, *Prove all things*, tho' it's directed equally to all, both Clergy and Laity, learned and unlearned ; yet there is surely a Deference to be paid by the weaker part of Mankind, to such as are at least equally good, and certainly much more wise and knowing than themselves : nor is this Deference to be confined to a trusting of their Word in Matters of Fact ; for, properly speaking, this is no Deference at all ; this is nothing but what every honest Man is obliged to pay to another, and what the wisest and best are obliged to, as well

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as others : but this Deference in the weaker towards the wiser, is to be extended even to their Opinions and Reasonings in many nice matters, of which the weaker may own, without any extraordinary degree of Modesty, that by their Education and Breeding they are not very capable Judges. But I shall not enter farther into this Subject, but proceed to the

THIRD Rule of the Apostle, *Hold fast that which is good* ; by which is meant, that we should hold fast that *only* which is so, embracing only such things as will stand the trial, and upon examination are found true and genuine, and rejecting whatever is spurious and false. Now with respect to this Rule, I shall observe very shortly,

In the 1st place, that there is a difference between what is in itself good and true, and what may appear so to us ; or that Good and Evil with regard to Actions, as also Truth and Falshood with regard to Propositions, are in themselves Realities, independent on our Opinions and Conclusions.

2^{dly}, Strictly speaking, we are only under an obligation to hold fast that which is really good in itself : nor is it perhaps an accurate or just way of speaking, to say that we are obliged to hold fast that which appears to us to be good, if in itself it is really evil ; or that we are under an Obligation to do an evil Action,
or

or believe a Proposition that's false, tho' it appear to us to be good or true. But yet,

3dly, Although, *strictly speaking*, we are only obliged to hold fast that which is really good in it self, and are under no Obligation to hold fast that which is evil in it self, tho' it appear to us to be good; yet, *in fact*, the only method we can follow in practice, is this; namely, to hold fast that which appears to us to be good, and that alone. In following this Method we may indeed be mistaken, and apprehend that to be good which in it self is really evil; nay, in following this Method we may not only be mistaken, but guilty of very great Crimes; as those were who put the Apostles to death in their Zeal, and thought they were doing God good service: Yet there is no other Method for us to follow; for to be sure we must not hold fast that which appears to us to be neither Good nor Evil, far less must we hold fast that which appears to us to be Evil. And if we can do neither of these, the only possible thing that remains, is to hold fast that, and that only, which appears to us to be Good.

THUS I have, as briefly as I could, illustrated these Rules of the Apostle in the general. I proceed now to the

Second General Head; namely, to consider some particular Methods of transgressing these Rules, that are but too common in the present

lent Age; and take notice of the Unreasonableness of such Conduct.

AND in the first place, there seem to be many, who are much inclined to transgress the first Rule, *Despise not Prophesyings*.

As it's a very rare and difficult thing for particular Persons to hold an equal Ballance, and not to incline sometimes to one side, and sometimes to the other; so the World is apt to run into Extremes, and go from one point to the opposite. Before the Reformation, that part of the Christian World in which we are chiefly concerned, was overrun with blind Zeal and implicit Faith in matters of Religion. In those days, scarce any pretended to Reason or Inquiry; the Follies and Superstitions of the Times passed current, and what the Church decreed, was received with the greatest submission: but now, and for several Years past, the Ballance inclines to the other side; and many are hastily running to the contrary Extreme: many seem to have a strange inclination of calling almost every thing in question, and under the pretence of thinking freely, a humour prevails of denying, or at least of making too light of all Religious Principles. If I may so express it, a great regard seems to be shown to the two last Rules of the Apostle in this Passage, *Prove all things, and Hold fast that which is good*. These are magnified and applauded, as if they comprehended all other, and were the only Rules worth observing;

observing ; while the Rule, *Despise not Prophecys*, is rather treated as obsolete and out of date. Not a few seem inclined to reject all Revelation without a trial, and a Sett of Principles are formed in this view : for without any Insinuations that Christianity is an Imposture, the pretence runs, that it is no great matter whether it be or not, since Reason can sufficiently instruct us without it. And the Scheme of Deism, with some of its latest Improvements, seems to be something of this kind :

“ THAT a God of infinite Wisdom and
 “ Goodness, neither will nor can require any
 “ thing from his Creatures, as the Terms on
 “ which their Happiness depends, but what
 “ is in it self good, or serves for some good
 “ purpose : That with respect to Morals, the
 “ only thing truly valuable is a Temper inclined to all rational Improvements, a social
 “ Disposition, and a suitable Conduct ; and
 “ therefore rational Creatures can only be acceptable to God, and indeed must always be
 “ acceptable to him, when by their Disposition they incline to polish and refine themselves, and to love their Fellow-Creatures ;
 “ and in consequence of this, when they make
 “ Advances in Knowledge and Wisdom, and
 “ observe the Rules of Temperance and Sobriety, Justice and Equity, Charity and Mercy ; in
 “ short, when they endeavour as much as they
 “ can, to make themselves and all round them

“ as happy as they can ; it's impossible that they
 “ should not be acceptable to an infinitely Wise
 “ and Good God, who can have no other views
 “ but the Happiness of his Creatures, and can
 “ only approve or disapprove of any, as they
 “ endeavour to introduce Happiness or Mi-
 “ sery into the World.”

THIS seems to be the Scheme that's insinuated in some late Pieces ; from whence the Inference is easy, That there is no necessity to inquire into the Truth of Divine Revelation : for whether at the bottom there is any reality in this or not, as it is a very preplexed Question, so without entring into it we can be very sure what is our Duty, and of the Terms of our Acceptance ; which are ever the same, whatever be supposed concerning Divine Revelation.

THIS, or something like this, I take to be the most plausible Argument for Infidelity, or an Indifference as to all matters of Revelation.

Now in Answer ; I cannot pretend to go through all the Parts of this Scheme, and shew every Defect in particular : many pious and learned Men have laboured on this Argument to good purpose. I shall only observe, That supposing the chief things our Adversaries advance to be true, if we consider them in the general, or abstractly ; supposing the only thing valuable, as to Morals, to be a Temper inclined to all rational Improvements, a social

Disposition and a suitable Conduct ; supposing that the Duty of rational Creatures, abstractly considered, is wholly comprehended in making Advances in Knowledge and Wisdom, and observing the Rules of Temperance and Sobriety, Justice and Equity, Charity and Mercy ; supposing too, that all this was clearly known without Revelation : there are yet many things of the greatest moment relating to our particular Circumstances, as to which Revelation alone can give us entire Satisfaction.

FOR here we must observe, that whatever we may conclude concerning the general System of Beings, from the Providence and universal Care of a God of infinite Goodness, Wisdom, and Power ; and how strongly soever we may argue, that all things in general shall be wisely and well ordered : yet as to humane Affairs, we are entirely at a loss, and know no more but this, That we shall not be neglected in the universal System ; but our Interest be consulted in a Consistency with the other great Designs of Providence : but what the Designs of Providence are with respect to us, and how far the Deity can favour us when we are *guilty*, is a Question we can by no means resolve, without a Declaration of the Will of God. It's this particular Circumstance, of our Guilt, that causes the Difficulty ; which would not be so great, were we intirely innocent : But now that we are guilty, it's not enough that we have general Accounts of God and his Providence ; but

but, in order to our Satisfaction, we must know his Methods with the Guilty.

AND this, I think, entirely overthrows this Scheme of the Deists I am now considering: nor can they ever show it needless to enquire into the Truth of divine Revelation; since we cannot be sure of our Duty, and the Terms of our Acceptance without it.

AND to make this Answer compleat; let us consider that the Christian Revelation is intirely built on the Supposition that we are guilty, and is calculated to satisfy the Wants of Creatures that are guilty. For the Design of the Christian Revelation is not so much to give us general Notions of what is right and wrong, and what in general is acceptable unto God: it rather supposes this in a great measure known already; and proceeds to give us a distinct View of our present Circumstances as guilty, and what is necessary for us, considering our Guilt and our Crimes.

ACCORDINGLY, Christianity teaches us, that we the Children of Men have fallen from the original Innocence, Perfection, and Happiness of our Nature; that whatever Pleasures or Comforts we may enjoy in our present State, we are not in that happy Condition in which we were at first created, and for which we were originally design'd: and farther, it teaches us, that without the Interposition of Heaven in our favour, we must in
time

time sink into a much lower State, and fall into the greatest degrees of Misery : But that God of his infinite Mercy has the most favourable Intentions towards us, and though he suffers us to die as a Consequence of our Fall, yet he entertains a merciful Design, to restore us to that Perfection for which we were originally designed in another Life beyond the Grave. It teaches us farther, that there have been, and are, several things necessary in the Wisdom of God to bring about this happy Effect ; and that certain Methods are laid down, by which we are to be prepared for this State of Happiness ; with all which Methods it calls us to comply.

THIS is the general Scheme of Christianity : I do not upon this Occasion offer to prove its Truth ; it is not necessary in the present Argument : it's enough, if what Christianity declares concerning our Circumstances is in itself possible, or, at farthest, as probable as any thing else : and it lies upon a Deist to show, that there is nothing in the Christian System that deserves our Regard, before he can justify himself in rejecting it without trial. But I proceed to another Method, by which these Rules of the Apostle are transgressed : Namely,

Secondly, When Men do not try and examine the Grounds of their Religion, as the Apostle directs, but take their Religion upon trust, without Caution or due Consideration.

ALAS!

ALAS! there are too many amongst us guilty in this respect; too many, we have reason to believe, that, even when they are in the right, it's merely by chance; and they in a manner only stumble upon the Truth. Many have never been at any pains at all to prove any thing in Religion, but are Christians for the same Reasons which would have made them *Pagans* or *Mahometans* in another Country, because it's the fashion, and their Fore-fathers have been in the same Belief before them. Great Numbers among us seem not to be in the least sensible that they ought to make any Inquiry into the Reasons of their Belief; but as truly build their Faith upon humane Authority, as those who openly profess to do it. The Stupidity and Ignorance of great Multitudes in this respect is too well known to many who hear me; and is the Occasion of many secret Mournings.

BUT here I am aware, that while I must be supposed to have chiefly in view the weaker and more ignorant Part of Mankind, some may be ready to alledge, that I blame them when they are not guilty; and that the weaker Part of Men are not capable of any nice Inquiries into the Grounds of Religion; that their Belief in these Matters neither is nor can be founded on any rational Examination; that their Faith is founded on something else, namely, an inward Savour and Relish which they find in the Doctrines and Precepts of Christianity,

tianity, by which this Religion testifies itself
 to be divine. In answer to which I will frankly
 acknowledge, that the Faith of the vulgar and
 weaker Part of Mankind is chiefly founded on
 the Native Goodness of the Doctrines and Pre-
 cepts of Christianity, or the Internal Marks
 (as they are call'd) of its Divinity : And that
 many Controversies relating to ancient Facts
 and Records seem plainly above their Capacity.
 And indeed, not only the Faith of the Vulgar,
 but all saving Faith whatsoever, is of a nature
 very different from a *mere Conviction* of the
 Understanding, that the Christian Religion is
 divine, wrought by rational Arguments, drawn
 from the Credibility of the Matters of Fact,
 and the Miracles of J E S U S and his Apostles.
 For tho' a Man may be persuaded by such
 Arguments of the Divinity of the Christian
 Religion ; yet a Conviction of this sort is not
 of such consequence, that we must suppose it
 necessarily connected with Salvation ; with-
 out an inward Sense of the Goodness of Chri-
 stianity, and a prevailing liking and regard to
 its great Design ; or, as the Apostle expresses it,
*a receiving the Love of the Truth, that we
 may be saved.* And when the Objection
 mentions an inward Savour and Relish, upon
 which the Faith of the Vulgar is said to be
 founded ; if no more is intended than this,
 that the Excellency of the Doctrines and Pre-
 cepts of Christianity is the principal Ground
 of their Belief ; and a View of this Excellency
 of

of the Christian System, with a prevailing Love to it on the account of its Goodness, is the chief Reason which induces them to embrace it; in this Sense, what is asserted in the Objection is true, but nothing to the purpose: For whatever is the Ground on which the Vulgar embrace Christianity, since it must be perfectly consistent with their using the Faculty of Reason as well as they can; no rational Creature can be excused, who does not exercise his Faculties and Powers in a rational manner, but depends intirely on Education and Fashion; and embraces whatever his Parents, or Guides of any kind, have thought fit to prepare for him without further Enquiry. But,

Thirdly, There is another Method by which these Rules of the Apostle are transgressed; namely, when Men not only do not examine in Matters of Religion, but discourage a free Trial and Examination in others. I grant, indeed, as I have observed already, that many are running apace to something of a contrary Extreme; and seem rather to be carrying this Matter too far: I do not mean, that we can examine the Grounds of our Assent in religious Matters too exactly; or design to insinuate, that we had very good reason for examining at the Reformation, when we suppose things were wrong; but that now, when we would suppose all things

exactly right, we ought not to indulge such a Liberty : This is not what I mean ; so far from it, that I cannot help asserting it to be a betraying of the Reformation, and the Principles upon which it was built. The Conduct of our Fore-fathers at the Reformation was very noble and generous, who scorning to be led blind-fold, or suffer their Understandings to be enslaved by the mere Authority of Men, boldly asserted the Cause of Liberty and Truth against the Tyranny of the Church, and the reigning Superstition of those days. *Free-thinking*, therefore, in the true Sense of the Word, is very noble and generous, being nothing else but this ; The hearkening to the Voice of sound Reason, the examining impartially both sides of the Question, with a Disposition always to adhere to the strongest Side, and to imbrace the Truth wherever it appears, in spite of all Prejudices, of all the Opposition and Authority of Men : this is what I can never censure, or apprehend capable of being carried to an Extreme. What I have in view, is of a different nature ; That under the pretence of doing this, many think very unjustly and unreasonably, and seem fond of rejecting Christianity. But then there are some on the other side, who, perhaps, out of a design of guarding against this abuse of Free-thinking and Examination in Matters of Religion, tho' they will not openly assert, that Men ought not to examine impartially, (as what

what Protestant will venture on such an Assertion?) yet by the strain of their Conversation, by their haughty and imperious Carriage, by their still putting us in mind of Authority and the Opinions and Determinations of Men, cannot even in Charity be considered otherwise than as Discouragers of due trial and examination in Matters of Religion. Such Men will allow no quarter even to the appearance of Enquiry, be it ever so modest; but are ever crying out against Examination, and extolling Authority and settled Standards. They are not only for putting these Standards to all those Uses for which they were composed by the Church; but for extending them to others, which she never designed, and no truly wise Man would wish them to be put to. What they seem to aim at is this, That we should, in forming our Principles concerning Religion; prior to any examination of these Standards, take it for granted that every Doctrine contained in them is just and true; and should as little dare to differ from them as from the Holy Scriptures themselves. Now this is to put humane Compositions and Confessions of Faith upon a level with the Sacred Writings; which the Church never intended. The Church by these Confessions designs to be helpful to the Body of the Faithful: nor can we deny but she designs to exclude from the holy Ministry all that cannot come up to these Confessions; not

thinking it fit to allow all Men promiscuously to be Ministers, whatsoever be their different Sentiments and Principles. But the Church never designed that Men in settling their Principles, should form them by any other Standard than Holy Scripture : and whatever value any Man may put upon a Confession of Faith, after he has examined it and found it agreeable to Scripture ; yet surely, whilst we are only forming our Principles, we ought not to make any humane Composure a Standard but examine all humane Composures by the Holy Scriptures, and agree to them only so far forth as they agree with this infallible Standard. I suppose no Protestant will acknowledge that he has any other Sentiment : but I observe, there are some whose Carriage bears a very different Aspect on many occasions ; and who talk of the Confessions of the Protestant Churches in such a way, that it's with difficulty one can interpret their Meaning in any other manner than this ; as if they had said, " If ever any Scruple arise in your Minds about any Doctrine in these Confessions, look upon it as a Temptation of the Devil, reject it with Indignation, and never reason about the matter. The Devil likes nothing better than to engage us in Reasonings on these Subjects, for then he thinks he has us sure." Certainly, my Reverend Brethren and Fathers, all of us must own that this is very absurd ; and directly contrary to these

these Rules of the Apostle, *Prove all things, hold fast that which is good.* But I come now to the

Third General Head I proposed; namely, to take notice of some things that seem proper to be observed by the Ministers of the Gospel, and all such as wish well to the Cause of divine Revelation.

AND *First*, seeing many are but too ready to *despise Prophecys*, let all who wish well to the Cause of Revelation manage with all honest and prudent Methods: And with this view, in the

1st PLACE, let us never cry out against a sober and free Inquiry into the Grounds of Religion; or pretend that Men have not a Right to examine what is proposed to their Assent: this is surely their natural Right, and it were happy if they would use it. It is the business especially of such as wish well to Revelation, to engage the World in an impartial Inquiry; for Revelation is a Cause which can never be advanced, and can never flourish, by any other Method: let us therefore invite Men to the strictest Examination, and offer them our Reasons with calmness and modesty; banishing far from us all Pride, all shew of disdain at their presuming to call in question what we alledge. Again, when we reason, let us not knock down our Adversary at every turn with Arguments from Authority, and think it sufficient

ficient to answer all Objections by this, that we are on the side of the Establishment: this indeed is proper enough for a Magistrate or a Judge, in matters that properly fall under his Cognizance as such; for oft-times a Magistrate must not allow established Rules to be disputed; he is not to argue, but use Authority. Nor is it unreasonable many times for private Persons, whatever are their private Opinions, to show a Deference for what is established, and agreeable to the general Sentiments of a Country; and it frequently proceeds merely from Rudeness and Ill-manners, or from Levity and Ignorance of the World, that private Persons in mixed Companies, without considering who are present, take upon them to attack and ridicule what is agreeable to Forms commonly received. But after all, that any Forms are established, is no sure Argument that they are good: for Truth and Reason do not depend upon Votes, but are the same, whether they be established or not: and it's great weakness, and does vast prejudice to our Cause, to defend it rather by Authority than Reason; for it tempts our Adversaries to believe we cannot defend it any other way. When we pretend therefore to reason, let us abstract from Authority; and as we should offer our own Reasons with Calmness and Modesty, so let us hear all that our Adversaries have to say with the same Calmness of Temper. Nay, let us encourage them, when it may

may be proper, to bring forth all their Objections with the greatest freedom; and make no unkind use of any freedom they take with us on such Occasions. Let us address them as *Joshua* did the People of *Israel*, *Joshua* xxiv. 15. *And if it seem evil to you to serve the Lord, chuse you this day whom you will serve, whether the Gods whom your Fathers served, that were on the other side of the Flood, or the Gods of the Amorites, in whose Land ye dwell: Or, as the Prophet* *Elijah* did the People in his time, *1 Kings* xviii. 21. *How long will ye halt betwixt two opinions? if the Lord be God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.* After these examples, let us not in our Reasonings put on magisterial Airs; nor pretend to dictate, threaten or impose.

2dly, LET us give up all weak Arguments, owning the Truth in every Case, and acknowledging a difficulty where it really appears: for Ingenuity is very engaging, wherever it is found; and by a Conduct of this nature we shall more readily gain upon our Adversary, than if we obstinately defend every point, whether right or wrong.

THERE was never any Cause, perhaps, which has not been so unlucky as to be weakly defended by some or other, who undertook to maintain it; and perhaps the best Causes have suffered this way as much as any other: for some, of a very good Meaning, but whose

whose Judgment has been no way equal to their Zeal, may have stretched some things too far, and perhaps laid as much stress on smaller things as on the greatest. They may perhaps have taken some Points into the Controversy, which have had no relation to the main Cause, and made them as essential as the Points that were most fundamental. In process of time, several of these additional parts may have been found precarious, several of them absolutely false in the opinion of the generality of sober Men. This may have been a mighty prejudice to the main Cause itself: for while some parts of the Scheme were found false, and such parts as have been declared fundamental by its Patrons, the whole Scheme has been upon this account rejected; which would never have happened, but thro' such a mismanagement.

Now let all of us beware of such Conduct: let us always own the Truth; let us separate the main Cause from Points that have little or no Connexion with it; let us carefully avoid laying the stress where it is not needful; and be always ready to give up all weak Arguments, however much insisted on by others.

AND the rather, that we live in an Age so enlightned, when weak Arguments and bad Reasonings will not pass so well as formerly; when the height of Zeal will not atone for any Failures in point of Conduct:
But,

But, on the contrary, a Man only exposes himself, if his Arguments are not proportioned to his warmth. In such an Age, let us beware of giving our Adversaries any advantage from our imprudence in managing our Cause.

3dly, LET us be pious and virtuous ourselves; and in the whole of our Conduct appear not only free from Crimes, but above the Suspicion of them. Let us behave with that Ingenuity that every thing shall appear open and fair, without Trick and Dissimulation: and when we profess to believe the Gospel of JESUS, and to have a firm Expectation of the Happiness of Heaven; let us not appear to be as much attached to the things of this present World, as others, who according to their Schemes can have no such Certainty of a future State. Let us not call others to live: as Pilgrims and Strangers on earth, to raise their Thoughts above the World; whilst at the same time we appear perfectly devoted to the Interests of the present Life, and pursue them with all the Cunning and worldly Wisdom of our carnal Neighbours. Let us not press others to moderate their Desires and Pursuits of the Riches, the Pleasures, and Honours of the World; while we grasp at them with the greatest Eagerness ourselves, and do not stick at dishonourable and unhandsome Methods to procure them: but let us appear to have a lively Sense of
divine

divine Things ; and let us endeavour to convince the World of this, rather by our Actions than our Words. And,

4thly, LET us be at peace among ourselves, and bear with one another according to the Rules of the Gospel. Alas! my Brethren, our united Forces are little enough to stop the Torrent of Infidelity ; laying aside therefore all smaller Differences, let us join all Hands not against the Persons, but the Cause of the Infidels. This is much better Employment than to tear and devour one another ; and thus to heighten Men's Prejudices against Religion and religious Men, when we shew them that we are proud, sour and malicious, and as little, if not less able to regulate our Passions, and govern our Tempers, than others. All these Methods, my Brethren, are necessary to be observed, considering how many now-a-days are ready to despise Prophesyings ; and perhaps by strictly observing these Methods, we may in time put a stop to the spreading of Infidelity, through the Blessing of our God, whose Assistance and Direction we are ever to implore. But again, in the

Second Place, As some are too ready to despise Prophesyings, and reject divine Revelations without trial, on whose account a particular sort of Conduct is needful ; so, on the other hand, there are others who transgress the other two Rules of the Apostle, *Prove all things ;*

things ; Hold fast that which is good. Their Principles are rather owing to Chance, than any Inquiry or Examination: They believe every Spirit, and take the whole of their Religion on trust: and as we all know what great Numbers there are of this sort, and how injurious their Conduct is to true Religion; we ought not to be unconcerned Spectators, but endeavour, if possible, to provide some Remedy.

INDEED there have been times, when perhaps it was the Interest of the Clergy, who had other Designs than the real Advancement of Piety, Virtue and true Religion, to keep the Laity as much in the dark as possible; their Tenets and Doctrines would not bear the Light: such Churchmen were not concerned how little Men thought for themselves, or how much they trusted to others; since they themselves were the Guides and sovereign Directors of their Consciences. It was not for the Interest of such Men to encourage Examination; it was rather their Business absolutely to discourage it, and in its stead to recommend blind Obedience and implicit Faith.

BUT as this is not our Case, our Conduct ought to be different.

As Christianity at first was not propagated by Force, but submitted to a free and impartial Examination; so it was by means of a free Inquiry, that after the dark and corrupt Ages of the Church, the Protestants reform-

ed so many of the Errors and Abuses of the Church of *Rome*: And it's only an impartial Inquiry, and free Search, that, according to the ordinary Course of things, can preserve Religion in any measure of Purity. For if we take up our Principles on trust, and embrace any Scheme that's offer'd to us without Examination, we may come to embrace the most absurd Things in Nature.

AND therefore, all who wish well to the Purity of Religion, and to the real Interest of divine Revelation, should endeavour to accustom Mankind to make use of their rational Faculties, and examine for themselves in Matters of Religion.

WE, that are Ministers of the Gospel, have a considerable hand in forming the Principles of the far greatest Body of the People, and ought not to deal with them merely by way of Authority: we ought not only to instruct them to believe so or so, but offer them Reasons, as they are capable to understand them; and endeavour to find out the shortest and plainest Reasons for the lower Part of Mankind, that they may not depend merely on Authority, but be able to give a Reason of their Faith and Hope in God.

It's true, indeed, there are many of the weaker sort not fit for nice Reasoning; and if they begin to examine, they very often turn to wrong Subjects: nothing will serve them but

to determine the most sublime Doctrines of Religion, or the nicest Parts of the Constitution of a Church; and frequently they are fonder of knowing what is proper for their Guides and Teachers in the most difficult Cases, and in which good and wise Men may differ, than understanding what is proper for themselves. There is one Subject in particular, which greatly exercises them; the Case of Separation from established Churches: and we find them very curious and attentive after whatever can warrant it, being very unwilling to miss any handle for this, which may offer, and seeming much fonder of dividing, than uniting; as thinking Religion consists far more in showing an Abhorrence to what is wrong in the Constitution of a Church, than purifying themselves from every thing that's vicious and immoral in their private Character. And indeed the Abuse of this Rule of the Apostle, by such as are called Free-thinkers on the one hand, and the weaker sort on the other; and the Abuse of the excellent Principle of the Right of private Judgment, which is founded upon it, is the strongest Objection which the Admirers of the Popish Implicit Faith can form against this grand Foundation of the Protestants. But the true way of removing the Force of this Objection is not by giving up the Principle itself, for this would ruin all; but by turning the Minds of Men

to

to the Examination of those Subjects that are at once most obvious to their Capacities, and of the greatest moment in their Lives.

AND therefore, let us that are Ministers be at due pains in this matter: let us inculcate this Rule of the Apostle, with a suitable Force; and lay before our People the Grounds of Religion, and the great Principles of it, with all Plainness and Perspicuity.

AND May God preserve us in this Island from a Deluge of Scepticism and Deism, on the one hand; and implicit Faith and blind Obedience, on the other. Amen.

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